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Military Significance of the Saudi F-15 Sale

The F-15s to be sold to Saudi Arabia (45 fighters and 15 trainers) are designed to be air defense weapons.

-- The F-15 will allow the Saudis to defend key areas of their airspace. Should the Saudis venture into Israeli airspace, they would be exposed to Israeli I-HAWK missiles, the Vulcan Chapparal air defense system, radar-controlled guns, and the best interceptor force in the Middle East.

-- It would be virtually impossible to convert those aircraft to ground attack versions without US authorization, and militarily unsound to do so in any event.

-- The US can control modifications to Saudi Arabia's F-15s by (1) denying the sale of new equipment, (2) refusing to allow the aircraft to be transferred to a third country for modification, or (3) refusing to allow third country nationals to have access to the aircraft in order to modify it in Saudi Arabia.

-- Saudi Arabia has stated that they will not transfer the aircraft to third countries and that they will use it only for legitimate self-defense.

-- Transfer of these aircraft or their deployment outside Saudi Arabia would be impractical owing to the absence of compatible IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) systems, the lack of trained ground support personnel and support equipment in other countries, and the non-familiarity of foreign pilots with the F-15. Further, transfer of these aircraft would denude Saudi airspace and invite retaliation. The aircraft would be vulnerable during transfer, as well as on the ground in third countries where protected shelters would not be available.

-- The Saudi Government has stated that the F-15 will be stationed, not at Tabuk, but at Dhahran, Taif and possibly at Riyadh or Khamis Mushait.

-- We can influence where the F-15s will be stationed by controlling both the provision of essential ground support equipment and the activities of US citizens in providing necessary support services.

-- These constraints would be absent if the Saudis bought the Mirage F-1C as an alternative to the F-15. In

addition, the F-1s would be delivered sooner, and probably in larger numbers.

-- The Mirage F-1C is a better attack bomber than the F-15. The F-1 will have almost twice the ordnance carrying capabilities as the Saudi F-15, an excellent bomb delivery system, and, unlike the Saudi F-15, may be equipped with precision-guided air-to-ground missiles.

-- Should Saudi Arabia purchase the F-1 aircraft, it would be compatible with F-1Cs in Libya, Iraq, and Kuwait. This commonality of equipment would facilitate transfer of the aircraft to combatant states in the event of renewed Middle East hostilities.

-- Moreover, there is precedent for concern about transfer of French-supplied aircraft. The French have continued to sell aircraft to Libya despite the fact that Libya ignored French protests when it sent planes to Egypt's aid in 1973.

-- In our judgment, Israel's security would be enhanced by a sale of F-15s, as opposed to a Saudi purchase of alternative aircraft.